

Rev. Morris Howe

A. Preface

The name of Morris Howe (1766-1843) is not well-known in Methodist history, but he is representative of the early circuit riders sent by Francis Asbury into the territory that now comprises the Susquehanna Conference. His service began before there were official conferences – and any preacher could be assigned to any circuit within the United States or Canada that was supplied by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although a native of Pennsylvania, he served mainly in the South – where there apparently was a need for circuit riders – until he located for health reasons back in Pennsylvania in 1800.

His ministry within the bounds of the present Susquehanna Conference began in 1803, when Bishop Francis Asbury asked him to come out of location to serve an unexpected vacancy on the Littleton circuit, based in Fort Littleton, which was then part of the Philadelphia Conference. In 1804, much of central and northeastern Pennsylvania was transferred to the Baltimore Conference, and Howe was appointed by that body to the Wyoming circuit (which would later become part of the Wyoming Conference). He closed his circuit ministry serving the Huntingdon, Juniata, Littleton and Aughwick circuits (which would all later become part of the Central Pennsylvania Conference).

In retirement, he moved to Ohio to live with his son Jesse Bowman Howe – but he maintained a strong interest in and loyalty to the Baltimore Conference. In 1840, knowing that his health was failing and that he would never again see his friends in the Baltimore Conference, he wrote a farewell letter to be read at the annual session of that body. That original hand-written letter, preserved in the archives of the Susquehanna Conference and presented as transcribed by the archivist in section B of this paper, is what has earned him a place in this volume of *The Chronicle* as a representative of his era.

The on-line data base of the conference archives has a card for every person who served in the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist denominations – i.e., from its creation in 1869 until the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968. Since Howe served while the area was still part of other conferences, he has no card – but if a card were created for him, it would appear as given on the following page. A pastor “on leave” is still considered part of the itinerancy, a pastor who is “located” still has credentials but is no longer part of the itinerancy.

Comparing the following record, constructed from the denomination’s General Minutes, to the letter that follows requires some explanations. Howe lists Stafford and Loudon and Lancaster as appointments, as does his denominational obituary, between Fairfax [1895] and Rockingham [1896]. These are likely mid-year changes in appointments, as Asbury had a habit of moving his pastors every

HOWE, MORRIS

Born: 4-23-1766 Montgomery County PA
 Died: 12-26-1843 Shelby County OH

married: Phoebe Osborne
 obit: [11/11/1767 – 2/27/1802]
 married2: Parmelia Bowman
 obit2: [1797 - ?]

1790 admitted on trial
 1792 ordained deacon
 1795 ordained elder

Interment: Pioneer Cemetery, Shelby County OH
 Obit: 1844 General Minutes, page 465

- 1790-91 East New River – with Joshua Cannon & M. Dean
- 1791-92 Tar River – with William Ormond
- 1792-93 Contentney – with Absalom Kinsey
- 1793-94 Montgomery – with Rezin Simpson
- 1794-95 Somerset – with Richard Stockett
- 1795-96 Baltimore circuit – with William Page & C. Williams
 *Carlisle
- 1796-97 Fairfax – with John Chalmers
 *Stafford
 *Loudon
 *Lancaster [VA]
- 1797-98 Rockingham – with John Pitts
- 1798-99 Pendleton
- 1799-00 on leave
- 1800-03 located
 Philadelphia Conference
- 1803-04 *Littleton – with Aquila Garrettson & J. Durbin
 *Trough Creek
 Baltimore Conference
- 1804-05 Wyoming – with Robert Burch
- 1805-06 Alleghany – with Daniel Fidler
- 1806-07 Alleghany – with Charles Warfield
- 1807-08 **Huntingdon – with Charles Warfield and Job Guest
- 1808-09 **Juniata – with David Stevens
- 1809-10 Littleton – with Jesse Pinnell
- 1810-12 Aughwick
- 1812 retired
 *appointments not listed in the annual General Minutes, but given in his
 obituary – apparently these were mid-year changes, as was the custom
 (i.e., 6 month appointments) in early Methodism
 **officially on leave for health reasons, but served as able

Note: Morris Howe is the father of Rev. Wesley Howe (1802-1869) of the Central PA Conference. The first Mrs. Howe is the daughter of Samuel Osborne of Juniata County, noted host of early circuit riders and preaching services. The second Mrs. Howe is the daughter of noted early preacher Christian Bowman of Briar Creek, Columbia County.

six months – for in those days there were not really sessions of annual conferences, but regional pastoral meetings as Asbury traveled around the country. It is strange that Howe does not mention the apparent Carlisle or Trough Creek mid-year appointments listed in his obituary. When his voice gave out, he took a leave of absence to see if there would be an improvement. Seeing no improvement, Howe then located – which is usually a permanent leaving of the itinerant ministry – only to have recovered sufficiently to re-enter the itinerancy a few years later.

B. The Letter

January 4, 1840
Green Township
Shelby County, Ohio

To the Bishops and Members of the Baltimore Annual Conference
when in session in Georgetown D.C., March 11, 1840

Dear Brethren,

These lines leave me in the possession of as much health and activity as I could expect near the close of my 74th year. Perhaps it will be as acceptable to the Conference as it will be gratifying to myself to give you a short sketch of my itinerating as a fellow laborer in the gospel in connection with you.

In the year 1790, at Bishop Asbury's request for some preachers from within the bounds of the Baltimore Conference to supply the lack of preachers in the North Carolina Conference, I set out with Benton Riggins. We traveled together as far as Petersburg in Virginia. We both took sick, unable to pursue our journey. Therefore we had to lay back to meet the Virginia Conference, which was sitting in Petersburg. Here I received my first appointment, in company with Joshua Cannon, to East New River Circuit in the low lands of North Carolina.

This circuit was five hundred miles in circumference. We had frequently to ride 30 miles in a day, preach and meet class, and sometimes preach to colored people at night. The Methodists then and there were few and far apart. They were persecuted by the men of the world and hated by the Devil. But they seemed to say but little and to pray always.

Joshua Cannon was taken for a vagabond and taken before two squires. When there, he requested to see the precept by which he was arrested. When he saw he was arrested for a vagabond, he informed their honors he had stated congregations who waited on his ministry as much so as any minister in the state. They let him go and did not commit him to jail.

The members – many of them were poor. And when our own clothes which we took into the circuit were worn out, they clothed us in cotton of their own manufacturing from head to foot – excepting hat and shoes. And when the year

came round, we received each \$30 quarterage. We left the circuit without a murmur, for we had seen good things among them.

The second circuit I rode was Tar River, the third Contentney – all in the low lands of North Carolina, a deathly climate. A land of skulls, for death has found no stopping place in our world. I availed myself of getting out of that unhealthy section of country by going to General Conference to be held in Baltimore – for every preacher who had stood out his probation then had a seat in General Conference.

At this conference I was appointed to Montgomery, then Somerset Eastern Shore, Baltimore circuit, Carlisle, Fairfax, Stafford, Loudon, Lancaster, Rockingham and Pendleton. On this circuit I took an inflammation of the lungs and could only speak in a loud whisper. My voice was gone, and at that time I never expected to preach again.

But in two years and a half, having recovered my health and voice, I met with Bishop Asbury in Carlisle. He requested me, if able, to fill John Philip's place on the Littleton circuit, which he had left without leave or notice. I did so. After that, I was appointed to Wyoming circuit. From thence, to two years on Alleghany circuit. Part of the last year, Brother John G. Watt filled my place and I was supernumerary – not being able to preach every day. The first year we took into the church upwards of 370. It was a time of great visitations from the Lord.

I was a supernumerary on Huntingdon circuit, and the year following on Juniata circuit. Then I was appointed to Littleton and Aughwick. This was the last of my itinerating among you.

Dear brethren, it is now some time since I have seen your faces, or heard your voices in prayer and preaching which so often has done us good. We here in the far west call over your names, or rehearse a part of your sermons – it is the nearest we can come to living over again with you. Your names are embalmed in our memory, and shall be until death. Not that we have no godly ministers here. We have first rate ministers – whose lives do not seem dear to them, so that they may finish the work the Lord has given them to do.

But early and long acquaintance and Christian fellowship with neither you nor my unworthy self is soon forgotten. I shall esteem it highly to have your prayers in Conference. My face on earth you will see no more. But Brethren, I expect to die in sight of the Promised Land, and then go up to possess my lot of inheritance in the good world above. I feel no doubt but that we shall strike hands there and sing – our labours and travels over. Amen

My Christian esteem and love to the Conference.

Farewell,
Morris Howe

C. Reading Between the Lines

Taken together, sections A and B appear to give a complete account of the ministry and spirit of Morris Howe. In truth, these sections present only the bare facts and do not begin to scratch the surface of the personal life of this circuit rider – a personal life of trials and struggles and hardships that is no doubt representative of most early circuit riders, if such documentation could ever be found.

Noted Methodist historian Abel Stevens (1815-1897) gives but one mention of Morris Howe – in a list of early circuit riders, along with his frank assessment (without documentation) of each:¹

Morris Howe, “a great exhorter,” twenty-seven years in the itinerancy, and spoken of as a very pathetic preacher.

The twenty-seven years in the itinerancy is measured from his admittance on trial in 1790 to his location in 1817 – which is explained in section D. But rather than his effectiveness in the ministry, this section focuses on his personal life.

Howe’s first wife was Phoebe Osborne. Phoebe’s father Samuel Osborne lived in the Turkey Valley of Juniata County and was a regular host of early Methodist circuit riders – both for preaching appointments and for overnight accommodations. Early frontier trails and circuit riders tended to follow the major rivers, but travelers between the Juniata River and the upper Susquehanna River did not dip south to where the Juniata empties into the Susquehanna – they rather took a shortcut, roughly between Liverpool and Millerstown, using either Pfautz Valley or Turkey Valley. Samuel Osborne appears regularly in the journal of noted circuit rider William Colbert (1764-1833).

Howe was appointed to Carlisle circuit during the second part of the 1795-96 conference year. Presumably, it was on the northern reaches of that circuit that he met Samuel Osborne and his daughter Phoebe. While the exact date of the marriage between Morris Howe and Phoebe Osborne remains unknown, in 1798 Samuel Osborne deeded 100 acres to “Phoebe Howe.” Morris Howe eventually owned over 300 acres in Turkey Valley, most of it once owned by the Osborne family, and he did not divest himself of his Juniata County properties until 1837 – well after he had moved to Ohio.

In 1800, Howe located for health reasons, and the couple settled in Millerstown, near Phoebe’s parents. Wesley Howe, the son of Morris and Phoebe, was born February 5, 1802 – and Phoebe died 22 days later, presumably from complications associated with child birth. Phoebe was buried at St. James² Cemetery in Turkey Valley. Wesley was then sent to Green Village, which he

¹ *A Compendious History of American Methodism* (1867), page 365.

² St. James ceased to be listed as a United Methodist Church on the Turkey Valley charge in 2006. The church appears to have been served by the Evangelicals for over 100 years, although it was originally Lutheran (hence the un-Evangelical name) – an offshoot of St. Michael’s Lutheran in Pfautz Valley. Exactly how and when it became Evangelical (and then EUB and then UM) is not known, but the building now houses an independent congregation.

always considered his home, to be raised by Methodist relatives.³ He was one of the key supporters of the erection of the Methodist Episcopal church building there in 1827. Rev. Wesley Howe (1802-1869) was admitted on trial into the Baltimore Conference in 1831, served 31 years in the itinerant ministry, and lived to be an 1868 charter member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

Morris Howe was later appointed to the Wyoming Circuit, home of the noted brothers Thomas and Christian Bowman of Briar Creek – converted under Francis Asbury when they lived near the Delaware Water Gap and ordained by Asbury at Forty Fort in 1807. They were responsible for the erection of the historic Old Stone Church near Berwick and for the powerful revivals that established Methodism in that area. There Morris Howe married the daughter of another noted Methodist host of circuit riders, Christian Bowman’s daughter Parmelia.

D. Epilogue

The interesting epilogue to this story is the fact that this letter and Morris Howe’s continuing association with the Baltimore Conference would not have existed at all were it not for a decision of the 1820 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in Baltimore MD. At the heart of the matter was the system used by the denomination to categorize its ordained preachers not serving under appointment. The three such classifications were...

“supernumerary” – which is essentially, “on leave.” Persons typically entered this category because of temporary health, financial, personal or family problems. These persons were still ministerial members of the conference, with the right to vote and administer the sacraments. Such persons would be excused from taking an appointment, but there had to be a valid reason to be placed in this category – and there was a limit as to how long one could remain in this category. It was not unusual for a person in poor health but near the age of retirement to request the supernumerary relation for a year or two before entering into retirement.

“located” – which meant removed from itinerant system. Persons typically entered this category because of permanent health, financial, personal or family problems – or simply because they desired to leave the ministry. Such persons were no longer ministerial members of the conference and had no vote – but they could continue to offer the sacraments with the same authority as local pastors who had never entered the itinerant ministry. They could serve as supply pastors but could not be appointed to a charge without applying for re-admittance to the conference

“superannuated” – which is essentially, “retired.” Persons in this category are still voting members of the conference and able to offer the sacraments.

³ The “Methodist relatives” are believed to have been the Cookson family, as that surname is prominent in early Methodism in both the Turkey Valley area and the Green Village area – although an exact Osborne-Cookson relationship has not yet been documented.

Today the classifications and conditions for “leave” and “location” and “retirement” are well-defined and have implications regarding appointability, salary, health benefits, pensions, etc. A person officially “retired” and collecting retirement benefits, for example, may serve as a supply pastor, but may not be appointed to a charge. In early Methodism, where there were no health benefits or retirement plans or other complications to consider, the classifications were not as carefully defined.

When Morris Howe retired in 1812 he was only 46 years old, and the move was motivated partly on account of his less than perfect health. He then moved to Ohio. But as a retired member of the Baltimore Conference, he still had voting rights and the authority from that conference to administer the sacraments – even though he lived in Ohio and was no longer physically attending the meetings of the Baltimore Conference. In 1815 it was decided that considering his age and health, he should more properly be considered on leave – and so his status was officially changed from superannuated to supernumerary. In 1817 it was decided that he had been in the supernumerary category long enough, and with no reasonable hope of returning to the active itinerancy in the Baltimore Conference, his status was changed from supernumerary to located.

This meant that Howe was no longer considered a ministerial member of the conference – and upon being notified of such, he filed a complaint. He had not asked for a change of status, and he maintained that a person could not be located – there being no chargeable offense committed – against his will. There were arguments, decisions and appeals within the Baltimore Conference, but the Case of Morris Howe ultimately came before the 1820 General Conference for final resolution. The following paragraphs from journal of that conference speak for themselves.

Monday, May 8, 1820.⁴

Moved and seconded that the case of Morris Howe be taken up.

Signed, N. Bangs, S. Merwin. Carried.

The papers were then read. A debate took place on a point of order, which was submitted to the chair. The president gave no opinion on the subject, but wished the case to be argued, considering it a similar case to brother Houston’s.⁵

The following resolution was submitted: –

Resolved, by the delegates of the annual conferences in General

⁴ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, volume I, 1796-1836, page 192.

⁵ William Houston, now a member of the Western Conference, had previously been located by the Baltimore Conference and sought to have that decision reversed. The journal states on page 190 that “Wm. Houston, an infirm travelling preacher of said conference, was located against his will, no charge of immorality or other ground of censure against Wm. Houston having been preferred against him, or in any wise pretended.” Ultimately, in separate resolutions, the actions of the Baltimore Conference to locate Howe and Houston were reversed.

Conference assembled, That the decision of the Baltimore Annual Conference, by which Morris Howe was located without his request, ought to be, and the same is hereby reversed. Signed, D. Ostrander, J. Soule.

It was moved to amend the resolution by adding, "no sufficient reason thereof appearing on the records in the said case." Signed, J. Emory, P.P. Sandford.

About half-past ten o'clock Bishop Roberts took the chair.

The amendment being under consideration and debate, the previous question was called for. It was decided by the chair to be out of order.

The question was taken on the amendment and carried.

Moved and seconded, to postpone the further consideration of the case of Morris Howe until to-morrow. Signed, S.G. Roszel, T. Burch. Carried.

Saturday, May 27, 1820.⁶

Moved and seconded to take up the case of Morris Howe, which had been laid on the table the eighth instant. Carried

The papers were read, and the question taken on the former resolution, going to revise the decision of the Baltimore Annual Conference, and carried.

And so the action and decision of the Baltimore Conference was reversed by the General Conference, and Morris Howe was reclassified from located to superannuated. That change was reflected in the 1821 minutes of the Baltimore Conference, and remained so until Howe's death.

Most likely in consideration of the cases of Howe and Houston, although no specific names are mentioned, a separate resolution relating to the right of an annual conference to impose location on a member was later proposed – and not approved – at the 1820 General Conference as follows.⁷

Resolved, That the annual conferences have a right to locate any member, by a majority of two-thirds, that will not fill the relation [appointment] given him by his conference, having, in the judgment of the conference, health sufficient for the purpose of filling said relation. Signed, S.G. Roszel, J.B. Finley.

Moved and seconded, to amend the resolution by erasing the word "locate" and inserting the word "expel."

The question was taken on the amendment. Lost

The previous question was called for. Shall the main question now be put? and carried.

The question was taken on the resolution, and was lost.

⁶ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, volume I, 1796-1836, page 238.

⁷ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, volume I, 1796-1836, pages 238-239.